

their men came boasting of the rout of the tax-gatherers and the capture of Rochester Castle. From the villages hidden deep in the forests of the Weald, from the vales of Surrey and Sussex, determined bands were moving to the place of muster. Many of the Essex rebels had come across the Thames to swell the tale, while others were known to be guarding the northern approaches of London. Canterbury had been revolutionised only on the Monday, but those who had seized the Cathedral city may have reached Blackheath on the evening of Wednesday. John Ball, too, was in the camp. He had been released by the rebels from the Archbishop's prison in Maidstone, where he was undergoing, not for the first time, the discipline of the Church for his railings against the ecclesiastical establishment. His release may have taken place on Friday the 7th, when the rioting in Maidstone began, or on the 11th, when the King's gaol also was broken open.¹ Whenever it was that he joined the rebel army, he became at once the principal figure in their camp. He delivered to the multitude on Blackheath a sermon which struck the imagination of all contemporaries, for it was the last word spoken, before the people met their rulers face to face. He took for his text, it was afterwards said, the famous couplet about Adam and Eve. All men had been created equal by nature ; villenage was the work of sinful men, and ought to be abolished. It was believed by his enemies that he ended by exhorting the mob to slay the King's ministers and the men of law.² Considering the events of the next few days, it is quite likely that his exhortation was at least as violent as this. If John Ball was opposed to the murders done, his influence over the mob must have been so slight as scarcely to warrant his great place in the histories of the time. However, he was far the most interesting of the rebel leaders. The rest, even Wat Tyler, are to us mere shadows, their past history unknown, their identity often in doubt. John Ball, after a life of persistent agitation, persecuted, imprisoned again and again, but never flinching from his task, had won the hearts of the classes he had long loved and

¹ Knighton, ii. 131-2 ; *Anc. Ind.*, 35, skins 7, 12; *Kent Arch.*, iiL 74, 81. ² Wals., ii. 33.